INSECURITY AND ENDANGERED COMMUNITIES: A STUDY OF THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF BANDITRY AND HERDERS' INCURSIONS IN BENUE STATE, NIGERIA, 2005–2025

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.64633/wissj.v10i7.13

Keywords

Benue State, Insecurity, Banditry, Herders' incursions, Socio-economic impact, Endangered communities, Internally displaced persons, Human security

Abstract

Research Problem: *Benue State has experienced persistent insecurity since the early 2000s, marked by farmer herder conflicts, banditry and organised crime. These challenges have generated severe humanitarian and socio economic consequences, yet their cumulative effects on vulnerable communities remain insufficiently integrated.*
Methods/theory: *The study adopts a qualitative research design based on an extensive review of academic literature, policy documents and empirical studies covering 2005 to 2025. It draws on the Vulnerability Framework, Human Security Framework, Security Complex Theory, Political Economy Theory, Social Identity Theory, Frustration Aggression Theory, Routine Activity Theory and Eco violence Theory to explain the multidimensional drivers and consequences of insecurity.*
Results: *The findings indicate that insecurity has caused over 28,997 deaths, including 6,896 between 2023 and 2025, displaced approximately 500,182 persons, destroyed 54,476 houses and generated agricultural losses exceeding ₦21 billion. Evidence reviewed shows that a 1 percent increase in insecurity incidents corresponds with a 0.211 percent decline in crop output and a 0.311 percent decline in livestock output. The crisis has disrupted livelihoods, education and healthcare, intensified poverty and contributed to Benue's transition from a food surplus to a food deficit economy.*
Conclusion: *Benue's insecurity is not reducible to farmer herder conflict but reflects the convergence of environmental pressure, governance failure, historical grievances, criminal opportunism and identity based tensions.*

Key Contribution to Knowledge: *The study integrates multiple theoretical perspectives to demonstrate how insecurity produces interconnected humanitarian, economic and institutional vulnerabilities.*
Recommendation: *A coordinated strategy encompassing security reform, community conflict resolution, land use reform, humanitarian and psychosocial support, agricultural recovery and accountability is recommended, alongside measures addressing climate induced resource scarcity, poverty and weak governance.*

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of insecurity in Nigeria has become increasingly complex and multidimensional, with Benue State emerging as one of the most severely affected regions in the country's Middle Belt. For over two decades, Benue State has grappled with persistent security challenges that have transformed the lives of millions of residents, fundamentally disrupting social structures, economic systems and the fabric of community life. The insecurity encompasses multiple overlapping phenomena: violent farmer-herder conflicts rooted in competition for productive land, sophisticated banditry operations involving kidnapping for ransom and cattle rustling, organised armed robbery, and communal violence driven by ethnic and religious tensions.

Banditry and herder incursion in Benue State have historical roots that predate the contemporary crisis, often linked to pre-colonial power struggles and competition for resources. During the colonial era of the early twentieth century, the British Indirect Rule system disrupted traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms and, in the assessment of some scholars, favoured settled communities over Fulani herders, creating resentment and a sense of marginalisation among herders that arguably contributed to later grievances. In the post-colonial decades from the 1960s to the 1990s, political instability, ethnic tensions and competition for land intensified after independence, while resource depletion linked to desertification in Northern Nigeria further strained relations between herders and farmers. Decades of economic mismanagement and neglect of rural areas produced socio-economic marginalisation, poverty and unemployment, creating fertile ground for cattle rustling and banditry. Weak governance and the inability to implement effective security and conflict-resolution institutions eroded public trust and allowed banditry to flourish, while the absence of clear land-tenure systems compounded competition for scarce land and water resources driven by desertification and population growth.

The contemporary insecurity crisis in Benue State cannot, therefore, be adequately understood as a simple pastoral-agricultural conflict. It represents a complex convergence of environmental pressures, governance failures, historical grievances, criminal opportunism and institutional weaknesses that has produced a sustained pattern of violence and displacement. Since 2005, when systematic documentation of insecurity incidents intensified, the state has witnessed an exponential growth in violent incidents, with the most severe escalation occurring from 2015 onward. In the two years from 2023 to 2025 alone, Benue State accounted for 6,896 deaths attributed to armed attacks, surpassing even Plateau State's casualty figures and representing the highest death toll among Nigerian states experiencing insecurity in that period.

The socio-economic impacts of this prolonged insecurity are staggering and multifaceted. Beyond the immediate

humanitarian tragedy of lost and injured lives, insecurity has systematically undermined the productive capacity of a state historically known as Nigeria's food basket owing to its agricultural strength. Over 500,000 persons have been internally displaced, with thousands living in IDP camps lacking adequate food, water, sanitation and healthcare. Agricultural production has plummeted, educational systems have collapsed in affected areas, healthcare delivery has been severely compromised, and the psychological toll on survivors has been profound and lasting. Economic activity has contracted, investment has fled the state, unemployment has surged, and poverty has escalated. This article examines the socio-economic impacts of insecurity in Benue State from 2005 to 2025, analysing the interconnected phenomena of banditry and herders' incursions, their consequences for endangered communities, and the policy responses developed to address these challenges, with a view to identifying evidence-based recommendations addressing both the symptoms and the structural drivers of insecurity.

Thus, the problematic of the study is that the security challenges in Benue State have been significant in recent decades, with banditry and herder-farmer conflicts emerging as major threats to the safety and well-being of communities across the region. While media coverage and anecdotal evidence highlight the rise in banditry and herders' incursions, a comprehensive understanding of these phenomena and their consequences has remained comparatively underdeveloped in the scholarly literature. This article investigates the complexities of these issues and their impact on vulnerable populations. Therefore, the research objectives are:

i. To trace the historical, social, economic and political factors contributing to the rise of banditry and herder-farmer conflicts in Benue State between 2005 and 2025.

ii. To assess the social and economic impact of these security challenges on the lives and livelihoods of endangered communities in Benue State.

iii. To evaluate government and community responses to the crisis, including the effectiveness and limitations of existing policy instruments.

iv. To provide evidence-based recommendations for sustainable conflict resolution, community resilience and long-term security strategies.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Studies on the Drivers of Farmer-Herder Conflict

Several studies have explored the drivers of conflict in Nigeria. Adger and colleagues highlight the role of climate change and desertification in pushing herders southward, leading to resource competition, while Blench emphasises the disruption of traditional grazing routes as a contributing factor. Ifeanyi-Obi and colleagues explore the complex interplay of factors, including ethno-religious tensions, in herder-farmer conflicts. Farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria have deep historical roots predating the colonial era; during the pre-colonial period, pastoralist and agricultural communities maintained complex, often mutually beneficial relationships, later formalised under colonial administration through the 'Burti system' of negotiated transhumance corridors. This system collapsed around the 1970s as farmers increasingly claimed land along migration paths, while post-colonial urbanisation, population growth, agricultural intensification and capitalist land appropriation further constrained grazing land, and the transition from traditional milk-for-grain barter to monetised economies weakened social bonds between herders and farmers.

In Benue State specifically, farmer-herder tensions escalated significantly following the return to democracy in 1999, with the conflict typically traced to 2001, when a Tiv farmer was killed by Fulani cattle, an incident that crystallised long-standing tensions. Escalation accelerated from the mid-2010s, with major violent episodes including the 2016 Agatu massacres, which formed part of an estimated 3,920 deaths in Agatu LGA between 2013 and 2017, the Odugbeho massacre, and the Nimbo massacre. Matua's study of the Agatu 'massacre' reterritorialises the analysis of farmer-herder relations, framing the violence within a moral economy of land and belonging rather than a simple resource dispute. These incidents demonstrated a qualitative shift from localised disputes to organised, coordinated violence involving sophisticated weapons and coordinated attacks across multiple communities.

2.2 Studies on Banditry as a Distinct Phenomenon

While farmer-herder conflict constitutes one dimension of Benue State's insecurity, banditry represents a distinct but overlapping phenomenon. In the Nigerian context, banditry refers to organised criminal activity including kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, armed robbery, sexual violence, arson and attacks on communities, and is primarily economically rather than ideologically motivated, distinguishing it from insurgent groups such as Boko Haram. Recent scholarship, including work by Idowu and Arua on patterns and trends of banditry in North-West Nigeria and Ojewale's analysis of plural policing models against armed banditry, documents the transformation of farmer-herder conflict into more organised banditry, as displaced herders and their associates transition into armed crime and criminal networks exploiting general insecurity proliferate, often comprising individuals from multiple ethnic backgrounds united by economic motivation. Saminu, binYaacob and Shukri's study of bandits' struggle for survival in Zamfara State similarly documents the economic logic underpinning banditry's humanitarian impact, while Maigari, Dantani and Arafat examine the difficult politics of negotiating with bandits in Katsina State. The proliferation of small arms and light weapons, porous borders with neighbouring Niger, weak state security presence in rural areas, and the availability of ungoverned forest territories have created enabling conditions for banditry to flourish and grow increasingly sophisticated.

2.3 Socio-Economic Impact Studies

Existing research on insecurity's socio-economic impacts in Benue and neighbouring states reveals consistent findings regarding disrupted livelihoods, food insecurity, educational collapse and healthcare deterioration. Ijirshar and colleagues, applying Structural Equation Modeling to Benue State data, quantify that a one percent increase in insecurity incidents correlates with a 0.211 percent decrease in crop output and a 0.311 percent decrease in livestock output, a finding consistent with Eneji, Babagario and Agri's earlier work on the effect of insecurity on agricultural productivity in the state and with Abubakar and colleagues' study of insecurity's effect on agricultural output. Income studies shown here reveal that average annual farm income for conflict-affected households has declined by 38 to 78 percent, with some households experiencing complete loss of agricultural income due to displacement, consistent with Owonibi and colleagues' case study of the socio-economic effects of armed banditry in neighbouring Niger State.

Research on IDPs, including the UNHCR and International Organization for Migration's Benue State IDP Intention Survey and Amnesty International's 2025 report on Benue's humanitarian disaster, documents severe deprivation across multiple dimensions:

inadequate shelter and exposure to harsh weather, insufficient food rations leading to malnutrition, limited healthcare access, inadequate water and sanitation, and widespread disease prevalence. Mikail, Ayuba, Zubairu and Bala's study of the impact of rural banditry on human security in Northern Nigeria similarly documents high rates of psychological distress among displaced populations and survivors of violence, while HumAngle's investigative reporting on the 'silent emergency' of ethnic and religious violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt situates Benue's crisis within a wider regional pattern. Educational impact studies show that over 55 schools have been destroyed, with hundreds more closed due to insecurity, and school enrolment plummeting in affected areas, with particular implications for girls' education and for the long-term human-capital trajectory of an entire generation.

2.4 Peace and Security Education

Igbuzor's work on peace and security education, while not addressing banditry and herder-related insecurity in Benue State directly, provides a relevant conceptual foundation for understanding the role of conflict resolution as a factor for sustainable peace and national development, arguing that peace education can equip communities with the skills and knowledge to resolve conflicts peacefully. This is particularly useful for addressing tensions between herders and farmers, a root cause of insecurity in Benue State, and is combined in this study with more recent, Benue-specific security scholarship to build a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by these endangered communities.

2.5 Gaps in the Literature

Despite this substantial body of scholarship, a gap exists in research that integrates the historical evolution of insecurity in Benue State with a systematic, quantified account of its socio-economic cost and a rigorous, multi-theoretical explanatory framework within a single study. Much existing research focuses narrowly either on conflict drivers, on specific economic effects such as agricultural output loss, or on humanitarian conditions in IDP camps, without connecting these threads into a unified historical and analytical account. Limited research, in particular, focuses on the long-term social and economic costs borne by these vulnerable communities across the full 2005–2025 period. This research is positioned to help close that gap.

3. Theoretical Framework

To gain a deeper understanding of the historical roots, drivers and consequences of insecurity in Benue State, this research draws on a combination of complementary theoretical frameworks, spanning individual-level, situational, environmental, political-economic and identity-based explanations of conflict.

3.1 Frustration-Aggression Theory

The Frustration-Aggression Theory offers insight into how economic desperation, marginalisation and relative deprivation drive individuals toward participation in violent crime and banditry. As poverty, unemployment and limited livelihood opportunities constrain youth and vulnerable populations, the theory suggests that frustration with these circumstances manifests in aggressive behaviour and violent crime, helping to explain why banditry has flourished in economically marginalised areas and why desperate individuals are recruited into armed groups.

3.2 Routine Activity Theory

Routine Activity Theory emphasises the convergence of three essential elements for crime to occur: motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians.

In Benue State, this theory highlights how a weak state security apparatus, porous borders, vast ungoverned forest territories and inadequate enforcement mechanisms create ideal conditions for banditry and armed crime, and suggests that effective crime prevention requires addressing all three elements simultaneously rather than any single one in isolation.

3.3 Eco-violence Theory

Eco-violence Theory links environmental factors, particularly resource scarcity and competition over productive resources, to the emergence of violent conflict. This framework is particularly relevant for understanding farmer-herder conflict in Benue State, as climate-change-induced desertification, population pressure and declining pastoral resources have intensified competition for grazing land and arable farmland.

3.4 Political Economy Theory

Political Economy Theory recognises that insecurity is not merely a security or criminal-justice issue but is fundamentally intertwined with governance structures, power dynamics, economic inequality and the distribution of resources. Applied to Benue State, the theory explains how competition for scarce resources such as land and water fuels herder-farmer conflict, exacerbated by weak governance and the absence of clear resource-management policy, and how elite interests, political manipulation and institutional corruption can perpetuate insecurity, with powerful individuals or groups sometimes benefiting from continued instability by controlling resources or profiting from the arms trade.

3.5 The Vulnerability Framework

The Vulnerability Framework focuses on the factors that increase a person's or community's susceptibility to harm from hazards and shocks. Applied here, it draws attention to social vulnerability, the way poverty, lack of education and marginalisation make communities more susceptible to the impacts of banditry and herders' incursions; economic vulnerability, the way dependence on agriculture and limited livelihood options make communities more vulnerable to disruptions caused by violence and displacement; and environmental vulnerability, the role of desertification and climate change in pushing herders southward and increasing resource competition.

3.6 The Human Security Framework

The Human Security Framework expands the traditional concept of security beyond the national level to focus on the protection of individuals from threats such as violence, hunger, disease and environmental degradation. It allows examination of the protection of communities from violence, assault and displacement; the ability of individuals to access necessities and livelihoods amid disruptions to agricultural production and trade; and the access of communities to adequate and nutritious food amid disruptions to agricultural activity and displacement caused by violence.

3.7 Security Complex Theory

Security Complex Theory emphasises the interconnectedness of security issues within a region, providing insight into how banditry, herder-farmer conflict and ethno-religious tension reinforce one another, creating a complex security environment. The theory helps explain how historical grievances and unresolved land disputes contribute to the current conflicts between herders and farmers in Benue State.

3.8 Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory, proposed by Henri Tajfel and later developed by Tajfel and Turner, explores how individuals categorise themselves and others into groups, shedding

light on how group identities shape perceptions and behaviour. It suggests that self-concept is grounded partly in group membership, and that individuals enhance self-esteem through affiliation with their group. Applied to Benue State, the theory offers insight into ethno-religious divisions, as perceptions of difference and historical narratives fuel tensions between ethnic and religious groups, often escalating into violence within the context of herder-farmer conflict. The categorisation of individuals into in-groups and out-groups based on ethnic or religious affiliation can accentuate inter-group differences, intensify conflict, and, in its most severe form, portray 'others' as a threat in ways that can justify violence and discrimination, perpetuating cycles of conflict and dehumanisation.

3.9 Synthesis of the Combined Framework

Employed together, these frameworks offer a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to insecurity and its impact on endangered communities in Benue State. The Vulnerability Framework identifies pre-existing inequalities that make communities more susceptible to harm; the Human Security Framework emphasises the multifaceted nature of the resulting threats; Security Complex Theory highlights the interconnectedness of the security issues involved; Political Economy Theory examines the role of power dynamics and resource competition; Social Identity Theory sheds light on how group identities shape and intensify conflict; while Frustration-Aggression, Routine Activity and Eco-violence theories together explain, respectively, why individuals turn to violence, why particular places and people become targets, and why environmental pressure so often supplies the underlying trigger. Read together, these eight frameworks support this research's central argument, developed in Sections 9 through 12, that Benue State's crisis is best understood as a convergence of vulnerability, weak guardianship, resource competition, political-economic incentive and identity-based grievance, rather than as a single-cause phenomenon.

4. Study Area and Methodology

4.1 Study Area

The study focuses on Benue State, Nigeria, and the 23 Local Government Areas that comprise the state. Benue State lies in Nigeria's Middle Belt, a region of diverse ethnicities, religions and ecological zones, known historically for its rich agricultural heritage as one of Nigeria's principal food-producing states. It is this agricultural heritage, and the competition it generates over dwindling land and water resources between farmers and pastoralists, that forms the backdrop to the contemporary insecurity crisis examined in this research.

4.2 Research Design and Data Collection

The study adopts a mixed-methods historical and documentary research design, combining qualitative and quantitative evidence gathered through both primary and secondary instruments. Primary data collection, where undertaken in the underlying field research this study draws upon and synthesises, involves gathering firsthand information directly from affected communities, security agencies, government officials and other stakeholders through Key Informant Interviews with community leaders, security personnel, government officials and humanitarian workers, conducted face-to-face, by phone, or through virtual meetings; Focus Group Discussions in small groups of six to ten participants with displaced persons, farmers, herders, women and youth, to gather collective insights on community experience, perception and coping mechanisms; and

structured or semi-structured surveys and questionnaires for victims, IDPs, local businesses and law-enforcement agencies, administered both in person and digitally, to capture statistical trends on displacement, crime rates, economic impact and security responses.

Secondary data collection draws on government and security reports, including policy documents on security frameworks, conflict-resolution efforts and IDP management sourced from the National Bureau of Statistics, the Nigeria Police, and the National Emergency Management Agency; archival and historical records, including land-ownership records, colonial-era policies and historical migration patterns, to understand the root causes of conflict; media and non-governmental organisation reports, including newspaper articles, online publications, and reports from organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, for content analysis of how media portrays insecurity and displacement trends; and satellite data and Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping, using remote-sensing techniques to analyse conflict hotspots, migration trends and environmental change, and to track displacement movements and land-encroachment patterns.

3.3 Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis proceeds through thematic, content and discourse analysis: thematic analysis identifies recurring themes and patterns across interviews, focus-group discussions and case studies, supported where appropriate by qualitative software such as NVivo or ATLAS.ti or by manual coding; content analysis examines news reports, policy documents and historical records, tracking narratives, biases and key discourses around insecurity; and discourse analysis evaluates language use in government policy, media reporting and local narrative on insecurity, to highlight underlying power structures, biases and community perspectives. Quantitative data analysis draws on descriptive statistics (percentages, frequencies and averages summarising survey data, using tools such as SPSS, Excel or STATA), GIS mapping (using tools such as ArcGIS, QGIS or Google Earth to visualise conflict-prone areas, migration trends and resource allocation), and regression and correlation analysis (using tools such as R, Python or STATA to examine causal relationships between insecurity and economic impact, migration or policy interventions), consistent with the Structural Equation Modeling approach used in the agricultural-output studies reviewed in Section 5.3.

3.4 Ethical Considerations and Risk Management

Research of this kind requires that informed consent be obtained, with participants voluntarily agreeing to interviews and discussions, and that confidentiality be maintained to protect the identities of victims, displaced persons and security-sensitive informants, including through data anonymisation using coded references in place of real names in reports where necessary. Fieldwork underlying the primary evidence drawn upon in this study has been conducted with local guides, avoiding high-risk zones, and in liaison with security agencies, as a measure of risk management appropriate to an active conflict setting.

4. Historical Overview of Insecurity in Benue State Since 2005

Table 1 summarises the periodisation of Benue State's insecurity crisis traced in this research, from its deeper pre-colonial and colonial antecedents through the contemporary 2020–2025 crisis period.

Period	Character of the Crisis
Pre-colonial and colonial era	Pastoralist and farming communities maintain complex, often mutually beneficial relationships. Colonial administration formalises transhumance through the 'Burti system' of negotiated cattle-migration corridors; British Indirect Rule simultaneously disrupts traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms and favours settled communities over herders.
1970s–2000	The Burti system collapses as farmers increasingly claim land along migration paths; post-colonial urbanisation, population growth and capitalist land appropriation constrain grazing land; monetised economies weaken herder-farmer social bonds.
2001–2010	Tensions crystallise around 2001 with the killing of a Tiv farmer by Fulani cattle, an incident that comes to symbolise long-standing grievances; sporadic, still-localised clashes occur in border areas of Agatu, Logo, Ukum and Katsina-Ala.
2010–2015	Escalation in frequency and severity; climate-induced pressures, population growth and land-use intensification compound tensions; Taraba-Benue cross-border raids intensify; the pre-2015 Sankera-area military operations in Katsina-Ala, Ukum and Logo LGAs precede subsequent militia formation.
2015–2017	Full-scale humanitarian crisis begins; the 2016 Agatu massacres (part of an estimated 3,920 deaths in Agatu LGA, 2013–2017), the Odugbeho massacre, and the April 2016 Nimbo massacre mark a qualitative shift to organised, coordinated, heavily armed violence.
2017–2020	Benue State enacts the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law (2017); implementation is undermined by resistance from herding communities, weak cross-border enforcement, and the absence of similar legislation in neighbouring states; kidnapping-for-ransom banditry becomes increasingly prevalent.
2020–2025	The most severe and sustained crisis period; all 23 LGAs affected; 6,896 documented deaths from 2023 to 2025 alone; over 500,000 IDPs; 2025 coordinated attacks in Gwer West, Guma, Ukum and Kwande LGAs; violence penetrates closer to Makurdi, the state capital.

Table 1

4.1 The Pre-2010 Period: Emergence of Contemporary Conflict

While farmer-herder tensions have existed for decades, the contemporary insecurity crisis in Benue State crystallised in the early 2000s. The historical marker for the beginning of organised herder-farmer violence is often cited as 2001, when tension between Tiv farmers and Fulani herders resulted in significant casualties following disputes over grazing rights and crop destruction, a period that witnessed the gradual normalisation of violent confrontation as the primary mechanism for resolving resource disputes. From 2005 to 2010, insecurity manifested primarily through sporadic farmer-herder clashes in border areas of local government areas such as Agatu, Logo, Ukum and Katsina-Ala; these incidents, while serious, remained relatively localised and did not yet constitute a state-wide humanitarian crisis, and the security apparatus, though inadequate, maintained some capacity for response and containment.

4.2 The Escalation Period, 2010–2015

The 2010–2015 period witnessed significant escalation in both frequency and severity of insecurity incidents. The emergence of climate-induced pressures, population growth and land-use intensification compounded traditional pastoral-agricultural tensions, and Taraba-Benue interstate conflicts escalated, with cross-border raids and retaliatory attacks claiming lives and displacing communities. Military operations in Katsina-Ala, Ukum and Logo LGAs (the Sankera area) prior to 2015 resulted in thousands of deaths and set the stage for subsequent militia formation and communal tension, as the availability of weapons, the proliferation of vigilante groups, and the weakening of state authority in rural areas contributed to a deteriorating security environment.

4.3 The Crisis Period, 2015–2017

This period marked the critical escalation where insecurity transformed from localised conflict into a full-scale humanitarian crisis. The 2016 Agatu massacres represent the watershed moment: beginning in January 2016, coordinated armed attacks on Agatu communities by groups allegedly composed of armed herders and militia resulted in hundreds of deaths in a single week, and over the 2013–2017 period, Agatu LGA alone experienced approximately 3,920 deaths attributed to herder-farmer conflict. The Odugbeho massacre and the subsequent Nimbo massacre of April 2016 demonstrated the scale and organisation of coordinated violence, distinguishable from spontaneous conflict by their organisation, scale, apparent coordination and use of sophisticated weaponry; survivors reported systematic burning of villages, destruction of food stores, and targeted killing of community leaders and youth. In response, the Benue State Government enacted the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law in 2017, a significant policy intervention aimed at eliminating the primary trigger of farmer-herder conflict by prohibiting unrestricted cattle grazing and requiring pastoralists to establish ranches.

4.4 The Persistence Period, 2017–2020

Despite legislative intervention through the anti-open-grazing law, insecurity persisted and, in some respects, intensified. Herders and associated armed groups allegedly continued encroaching into Benue State from neighbouring Niger, Nasarawa and Taraba states, and the law's implementation faced resistance from herding communities and challenges in cross-border enforcement given federal government inaction on similar legislation in neighbouring states. The period witnessed the emergence of more organised banditry networks, with kidnapping for ransom becoming increasingly prevalent as criminal elements took advantage of weak state presence to establish territorial operations focused on extracting ransom from farmers, traders and travellers.

4.5 The Contemporary Crisis, 2020–2025

The post-2020 period has witnessed the most severe and sustained security crisis. From 2023 to 2025, Benue State experienced 6,896 documented deaths attributed to armed violence, with Amnesty International characterising the situation as a humanitarian disaster; all 23 local government areas have been affected, though some face more frequent attacks than others. The period has been marked by increased sophistication and scale of coordinated attacks, mass-casualty incidents involving hundreds of deaths in single attacks, systematic destruction of infrastructure including healthcare facilities, schools and water systems, massive population displacement with over 500,000 IDPs as of 2025, territorial consolidation by certain criminal groups in specific areas, and cross-

border attacks and incursions. Between June 2025 and the present, coordinated attacks on communities in Gwer West, Guma, Ukum and Kwande LGAs have killed hundreds and displaced thousands, with violence increasingly penetrating closer to the state capital Makurdi, suggesting deteriorating state security capacity.

5. Social Impact of Banditry and Herders' Incursions on Endangered Communities

Table 2 summarises the principal quantified social and economic indicators discussed in Sections 10 and 11, drawn from the literature reviewed.

Indicator	Reported Figure
Total deaths, 2005–2025	Over 28,997 lives lost, with a marked acceleration in the 2015–2025 decade
Deaths, 2023–2025 alone	6,896 documented deaths — the highest death toll among Nigerian states experiencing insecurity in that window
Agatu LGA deaths, 2013–2017	Approximately 3,920 deaths attributed to herder-farmer conflict
Internally displaced persons	Approximately 500,182 as of December 2024 (some estimates exceed 510,000); ~15–20 percent of the state's population; 86 percent women and children
Houses destroyed	Over 54,476 since 2005
Schools destroyed or closed	Over 55 schools destroyed, with many more closed
Crop output effect	A 1 percent increase in insecurity incidents correlates with a 0.211 percent decrease in crop output
Livestock output effect	A 1 percent increase in insecurity incidents correlates with a 0.311 percent decrease in livestock output
Average annual crop income	Declined from ₦200,770.50 to ₦124,298.50 (–38 percent)
Average annual livestock income	Declined from ₦371,354.75 to ₦82,219.75 (–78 percent)
Agricultural losses (cumulative)	Valued at over ₦21 billion

Table 2

5.1 Loss of Life and Physical Injuries

The most immediate social impact of insecurity is the loss of human life. From 2005 to 2025, over 28,997 lives have been lost in Benue State due to insecurity-related violence, with particularly dramatic losses in the 2015–2025 decade and the 2023–2025 period alone accounting for 6,896 documented deaths, suggesting an acceleration in violence intensity. Critically, vulnerability to violence is not randomly distributed: women and children comprise most casualties in many incidents, with Amnesty International reporting that approximately 60 percent of deaths in the 2023–2024 period were women and children, a skewed casualty distribution reflecting targeting patterns and the deliberate targeting of communities during periods when men are away in fields or markets. Beyond fatal casualties, insecurity has produced thousands of injured survivors bearing physical disabilities, chronic pain and complicated health conditions, with burn injuries,

amputations and gunshot wounds common, yet survivors often lack access to adequate medical rehabilitation.

5.2 Forced Displacement and the IDP Crisis

Insecurity has produced one of Nigeria's largest internal displacement crises. As of December 2024, an estimated 500,182 internally displaced persons were documented in Benue State, though some estimates suggest the actual figure may exceed 510,000, representing approximately 15 to 20 percent of the state's total population, an extraordinarily high displacement ratio. The displacement process itself is traumatic and often violent, with communities reporting that armed groups arrive at night or during early morning hours, opening fire indiscriminately and forcing residents to flee with minimal belongings; many IDPs describe losing relatives during flight, with family members separated in panic, and several hundred minors have been documented as unaccompanied children. IDP camps have emerged across multiple local government areas, with major camps in Makurdi, Gwer West and Agatu, and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs documenting that 86 percent of IDPs are women and children. Living conditions in IDP camps are desperate, with Amnesty International investigations documenting wholly inadequate shelter, severe overcrowding, and grossly insufficient water and sanitation facilities.

5.3 Destruction of Housing and Infrastructure

Over 54,476 houses have been destroyed in insecurity-related violence since 2005, rendering massive segments of the population homeless or dependent on host communities, with destruction following systematic patterns in which entire village clusters are burned during major attack events. Beyond residential housing, critical infrastructure has been systematically destroyed: healthcare facilities, particularly primary health centres, have been burned and looted; over 55 schools have been destroyed or permanently closed; water points and boreholes have been destroyed or contaminated; and major market facilities in towns such as Abaji, Sai and Kyado have been destroyed, disrupting commercial activity and food distribution. The destruction extends to productive assets, with farms burned, livestock decimated through theft and slaughter, and stored grain reserves systematically destroyed.

5.4 Food Insecurity and Malnutrition

Insecurity has triggered a severe food-security crisis. Before the crisis, Benue State was known as Nigeria's food basket owing to its agricultural surplus; production has since plummeted, converting the state from a food-surplus to a food-deficit economy. Multiple causal pathways connect insecurity to food insecurity, including direct destruction of crops through violence and uncontrolled grazing, displacement preventing farmers from accessing farmland, loss of agricultural inputs and tools, disrupted marketing and distribution systems, and displaced populations lacking livelihood sources. IDPs in camps receive minimal food rations, often inadequate to meet nutritional needs, with malnutrition prevalence among IDP children elevated and pregnant and lactating women facing particular nutritional challenges.

5.5 Educational Disruption and Human Capital Loss

Insecurity has devastated the education sector. Over 55 schools have been destroyed by armed attackers, with many more abandoned and closed due to security concerns, rendering entire geographic areas without functional schools. Children in IDP camps are almost entirely out of school, with few arrangements for educational continuity, and hundreds of thousands of school-age children have missed multiple academic years, while

psychological trauma impairs cognitive functioning and learning capacity even where schooling remains available. The long-term consequences are severe: an entire generation risks being denied educational opportunity during critical developmental years, with lifelong consequences for individual human-capital formation and lifetime earnings, and constraints on Benue State's future economic productivity and development trajectory.

5.6 Health Sector Collapse and Disease Prevalence

The healthcare sector in insecurity-affected areas has experienced near collapse, with facilities destroyed, healthcare workers displaced or killed, and medical supplies looted or destroyed. Within IDP camps, healthcare access is severely limited; mobile clinics operated by humanitarian organisations provide basic services but cannot meet population health needs, and camps experience high prevalence of preventable diseases including malaria, typhoid and gastrointestinal infection. Maternal and child mortality are elevated relative to community averages, malnutrition compounds disease severity, and mental-health crises are widespread but largely untreated, with the combination of poor sanitation, limited healthcare access and malnutrition creating conditions conducive to epidemic disease emergence.

5.7 Psychological Trauma and Mental Health Crisis

The psychological impact of violence exposure and displacement is profound and pervasive. Survivors of attacks report nightmares, intrusive thoughts, hypervigilance and anxiety symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder, while the ongoing threat of violence perpetuates a state of chronic fear. Displaced populations report depression, hopelessness and despair regarding their futures, and children exposed to violence demonstrate behavioural difficulties, learning problems and emotional dysregulation. The psychological burden is compounded by the prolonged duration of displacement, with most IDPs displaced for multiple years without clear resolution or return prospects, meaning that the trauma of displacement functions as a chronic condition rather than a temporary acute crisis.

5.8 Social Cohesion Disruption and Communal Relations

Insecurity has fractured social cohesion within communities and between different groups. Suspicion and mistrust have replaced the social trust necessary for community functioning, and the attribution of violence to ethnic or religious groups has reinforced stereotypes and group-based prejudice, with some communities that previously coexisted becoming divided by mutual accusation and blame. Displacement creates a sense of rootlessness and non-belonging in host communities, which, while providing refuge, increasingly struggle with resource scarcity and population pressure, generating tension over resource access and community integration. Social-capital destruction extends to institutional weakening, as traditional authorities' capacity to resolve disputes is compromised, religious institutions are targeted or destroyed, and civil-society organisations face constraint.

6. Economic Impact of Banditry and Herders' Incursions

6.1 Agricultural Productivity Decline and Food Production Loss

Agriculture, representing approximately 85 percent of Benue State's economy and the primary livelihood of rural populations, has experienced catastrophic disruption. Structural Equation Modeling research has documented that a one percent increase in insecurity-related incidents correlates with a 0.211 percent decrease in crop production and a

0.311 percent decrease in livestock production. Comparative analysis of agricultural productivity before and during insecurity demonstrates dramatic production losses: average annual monetary value of crop production decreased from ₦200,770.50 pre-insecurity to ₦124,298.50 during insecurity, a 38 percent decline, while livestock production declined from ₦371,354.75 to ₦82,219.75, a 78 percent decline. The mechanisms driving this decline are multiple and reinforcing: displacement prevents farmers from accessing farmland; destroyed agricultural infrastructure eliminates production capacity; loss of livestock represents destroyed productive assets; insecurity and fear reduce willingness to invest in farming; disrupted input supply chains limit access to seeds, fertilisers and tools; destroyed storage facilities prevent post-harvest preservation; disrupted markets prevent crop marketing; and resource scarcity forces asset depletion as a survival strategy. Rice production in the northern agricultural zone, formerly a major production area, has been severely affected, with studies documenting that banditry negatively impacts all aspects of rice production from cultivation to harvest to marketing.

6.2 Income Loss and Livelihood Disruption

The primary livelihood source for the vast majority of Benue's rural population is agriculture, which has been systematically disrupted. Farmers displaced from their land have no income source, and those remaining in insecurity-affected areas cannot access farmland or conduct agricultural activity, resulting in income collapse for rural populations; quantitative research reveals average on-farm income declines from ₦200,770.50 to ₦124,298.50 for crops and from ₦371,354.75 to ₦82,219.75 for livestock, translating into reduced purchasing power, an inability to meet basic needs, and poverty escalation. Alternative livelihood opportunities in insecurity-affected areas are limited, as the destruction of markets has eliminated trading opportunities, decreased consumer spending power has reduced demand for goods and services, and many rural residents lack skills or access to alternative livelihood sources. IDPs in camps, disconnected from productive assets and farmland, have virtually no source of income, with humanitarian assistance falling far below what would be necessary for basic needs.

6.3 Inflation, Price Increases and Food Cost Escalation

The disruption of Benue State's food production has contributed to elevated national food inflation, which has risen to approximately 40 percent in the national economy, with Benue State's own markets experiencing even higher increases. Food prices have become prohibitively expensive for poor households, driven by reduced production, increasing scarcity, disrupted supply chains raising distribution costs, and increased demand from IDPs. For households with limited or no income, elevated food prices represent an insurmountable barrier to food access, contributing to widespread malnutrition and food insecurity among vulnerable populations.

6.4 Investment Collapse and Business Environment Deterioration

Business confidence in Benue State has collapsed, as insecurity has created a hostile environment for private investment and investors have either withdrawn from the state or redirected investment to more stable regions. The stock of productive capital has declined through destruction and asset depletion, with businesses destroyed during violence, commercial establishments damaged, and traders fleeing; major markets that formerly served as commercial hubs, including those in Tor Donga, Abaji, Abako, Sai and Kyado, have experienced dramatic contraction. The private

sector, already challenged by Nigeria's broader macroeconomic environment, has been devastated by insecurity in Benue, eliminating employment opportunities and reducing economic dynamism, and deteriorating the state's competitive position for attracting investment and commerce.

6.5 Unemployment and Poverty Escalation

The convergence of agricultural-production collapse, market disruption, investment withdrawal and general economic contraction has created an unemployment crisis. Rural agricultural labourers lack work, urban unemployment has risen, displaced populations are unable to find employment, and youth, particularly young men, face limited livelihood opportunities, with unemployment of young people with limited education and employment prospects creating frustration that can channel into violent crime or banditry, consistent with the Frustration-Aggression Theory discussed in Section 7.1. Poverty in Benue State has escalated precipitously, with the collapse of income sources, destruction of productive assets, and limited access to basic services impoverishing populations that were previously in the lower-middle income range.

6.6 Government Revenue Loss and Fiscal Constraint

The Benue State Government has experienced severe fiscal constraint because of insecurity. Multiple revenue sources have been disrupted, as the agricultural tax base has eroded with production collapse, business tax revenue has declined as business activity contracted, property tax has declined as property values fell and economic assets were destroyed, and internally generated revenue has plummeted. Simultaneously, government expenditure on security and emergency response has surged, diverting resources that could have been invested in education, healthcare and infrastructure development toward security operations and emergency assistance, with cascading negative effects on public service delivery that further constrain economic productivity in a vicious cycle.

6.7 Infrastructure Damage and Service Delivery Disruption

Over 54,476 houses have been destroyed, representing not only human shelter but accumulated capital, alongside damage to roads, transport networks, market facilities, healthcare facilities, schools and water systems. The destruction of infrastructure has multiple economic consequences: damaged roads increase transportation costs and transaction times, disrupted transport networks isolate communities and limit market access, destroyed educational infrastructure reduces human-capital formation, destroyed healthcare infrastructure impairs population health, and damaged water systems limit productivity and create health hazards. This represents lost capital stock that reduces productivity and constrains economic growth, with rehabilitation and reconstruction requiring enormous investment resources and the infrastructure deficit likely to constrain economic development for years or decades.

6.8 Agricultural Input Supply Chain Disruption

The disruption of agricultural input supply chains has further constrained agricultural productivity, as insecurity has disrupted the distribution of seeds, fertilisers, pesticides and agricultural equipment; rural markets where farmers traditionally purchase inputs have been destroyed or rendered inaccessible; and traders have fled insecurity-affected areas, eliminating informal input-distribution mechanisms. The result has been reduced access to agricultural inputs even for farmers remaining in their communities and attempting to continue farming, with declining use of improved seed varieties, modern fertilisers and

pest-management products, and farmers reverting to lower-productivity traditional practices.

7.9 Remittance Dependence and Rural Finance Constraint

Many rural households have shifted toward dependence on remittances from urban-based family members or diaspora members. While remittances have provided crucial survival support for some displaced households, the remittance flow is insufficient for meeting all household needs and is highly uncertain and variable. The financial-intermediation system serving rural areas has itself been disrupted, with rural finance institutions damaged or closed, farmers' access to agricultural credit curtailed, and the formal financial system's capacity to mobilise savings and channel credit to productive activity compromised.

8. Government and Community Responses: Achievements and Limitations

The Nigerian government has embarked on several efforts to address the country's broader security challenges, including the criminalisation of terrorism, expanded surveillance and investigation of criminal-related offences, heightened physical security measures aimed at deterring or disrupting attacks, and the strengthening of security agencies through the provision of facilities and equipment. In Benue State specifically, the most significant policy response has been the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law of 2017, aimed at eliminating the primary trigger of farmer-herder conflict by prohibiting unrestricted cattle grazing and requiring pastoralists to establish ranches. Despite these efforts, the level of insecurity in the state and the country more broadly remains high, and the government's security apparatus has been unable to guarantee safety.

The Open Grazing Prohibition Law, while representing important policy intent, has achieved limited success due to inadequate implementation, resistance from herding communities, lack of cross-border coordination with neighbouring Niger, Nasarawa and Taraba states, and insufficient resource allocation; the law has not prevented herder incursions or banditry escalation, reflecting broader governance and institutional-capacity limitations constraining policy effectiveness. Community-based solutions and international cooperation nonetheless retain significant potential: engagement of traditional authorities, religious leaders and civil-society organisations in dialogue facilitation, alongside international cooperation on infrastructure, health, education, technology and security-facility provision, of the kind highlighted in fora such as the January 2021 Nigeria-South Africa Chamber of Commerce webinar, can play a meaningful role in promoting regional peace and security when combined with sustained state commitment.

9. Recommendations

9.1 Security-Focused Interventions

i. Deploy additional security personnel to insecurity-affected areas, with emphasis on visible community presence and intelligence gathering, and establish mobile security units able to respond rapidly to reported incidents.

ii. Deploy modern surveillance technologies, including drones, CCTV networks and early-warning systems, in high-risk areas to deter criminal activity and provide early incident warning.

iii. Establish community-policing initiatives, recruiting local personnel familiar with terrain and communities, working collaboratively with formal security forces to build intelligence networks and trust, with an

emphasis on preventive action rather than reactive response.

iv. Strengthen cross-border security coordination with neighbouring Nasarawa, Taraba and Niger states, including joint patrol operations, information-sharing protocols and coordinated response mechanisms, with enhanced federal involvement in border security.

9.2 Conflict Resolution and Dialogue Initiatives

i. Facilitate structured dialogue between farmer and herder representatives through neutral third-party mediators, aiming to rebuild relationships, address specific grievances and develop conflict-management protocols, with religious leaders, traditional authorities and civil-society organisations participating in facilitation.

ii. Support and strengthen traditional dispute-resolution mechanisms, resourcing traditional authorities to conduct mediation, and enhance the legitimacy and efficacy of customary mechanisms through capacity building.

iii. Train community leaders and farmers' and herders' association leaders in conflict resolution, negotiation and mediation skills, so trained individuals can serve as local dispute-resolution resources.

9.3 Resource Management and Land Use Policy Reform

i. Implement comprehensive land-use planning identifying agricultural zones, pastoral grazing zones and mixed-use areas, balancing agricultural and pastoral needs while ensuring environmental sustainability.

ii. Complement the Open Grazing Prohibition Law with adequate grazing reserves and water infrastructure, and prioritize government investment in ranch infrastructure and support for pastoralists transitioning to ranching.

iii. Strengthen legal and institutional frameworks ensuring land-tenure security for both farmers and pastoralists, formalising vulnerable land-access arrangements through documentation and registration.

iv. Manage water-resource access for both agricultural and pastoral use through inclusive planning and equitable allocation, demarcating specific water points for pastoral use during transhumance periods.

9.4 Humanitarian Assistance and IDP Support

i. Upgrade IDP camps with adequate shelter materials, sanitation facilities, water systems and healthcare infrastructure, meeting humanitarian standards for minimum shelter, water access and sanitation.

ii. Provide IDPs with agricultural inputs, community gardens, agricultural training and microfinance services enabling productive engagement and small-scale income generation.

iii. Provide educational services for IDP children, including temporary schools, teacher recruitment, school materials, and distance or accelerated learning programmes for children who have missed extended schooling.

iv. Provide mobile healthcare clinics, vaccination programmes, maternal healthcare and disease prevention, with referral mechanisms to secondary healthcare.

9.5 Agricultural Rehabilitation and Economic Recovery

i. Provide smallholder farmers with improved seed varieties, fertilisers and agricultural tools, alongside extension services supporting improved and climate-smart farming techniques.

ii. Rehabilitate destroyed market facilities and secure rural markets to reduce transaction costs and restore commercial activity.

iii. Expand agricultural credit programmes, loan guarantee schemes and microfinance services in rural areas.

iv. Support pastoralists recovering from livestock losses through restocking programmes, veterinary services, and cooperative associations enabling collective action.

9.6 Education and Healthcare Sector Rehabilitation

i. Reconstruct destroyed schools, expand educational infrastructure, provide teaching and learning materials, and recruit and incentivise teachers to serve in affected areas, with trauma-informed pedagogy training.

ii. Support accelerated learning and distance or non-formal education programmes for students who have missed substantial schooling.

iii. Rehabilitate and equip destroyed and damaged health facilities, recruit and deploy health workers with appropriate incentives, and expand mental-health and psychosocial support services for trauma survivors and displaced populations.

iv. Expand vaccination programmes, water and sanitation improvements, and disease surveillance to address preventable disease prevalence in displaced populations.

9.7 Women, Youth and Accountability-Focused Interventions

i. Establish women-focused livelihood programmes providing skills training, microfinance and business-development support, and increase women's participation in peacebuilding and decision-making.

ii. Establish youth employment, entrepreneurship and agripreneurship programmes providing skills training, startup support and market linkages.

iii. Expand services addressing gender-based violence, including legal assistance, healthcare and psychosocial support, alongside prevention programmes addressing harmful gender norms.

iv. Rigorously investigate crimes committed by all sides, including allegations against security forces, and ensure transparent, impartial justice processes, adequately funded compensation for victims, and truth and reconciliation mechanisms.

v. Establish inter-agency coordination mechanisms bringing together security agencies, development agencies, humanitarian organisations and civil society for coordinated response, and strengthen state institutions through capacity building, resourcing and institutional reform.

10. Conclusion

Benue State's insecurity crisis represents one of Nigeria's most severe humanitarian and development challenges. Over two decades of persistent violence, culminating in the catastrophic 2015–2025 period, have resulted in nearly 7,000 deaths in just two years, displacement of over 500,000 persons, destruction of over 54,000 houses, and comprehensive disruption of productive systems. This phenomenon is not a simple pastoral conflict but a complex convergence of environmental pressures, resource competition, governance failures, ethnic and religious tensions, and criminal opportunism, as the combined theoretical framework developed in Section 7 makes clear.

The socio-economic impacts are staggering across multiple dimensions. Displaced populations languish in desperate camp conditions lacking adequate shelter, water, sanitation and healthcare. Children have been denied education, with profound consequences for human-capital formation. Food insecurity and malnutrition are widespread, healthcare

delivery has collapsed, psychological trauma is pervasive, and social cohesion has fractured. Agricultural production, the state's economic foundation, has collapsed, with crop output declining an estimated 38 percent and livestock output 78 percent in the comparisons studied here. Income sources have evaporated for millions, markets have been destroyed, business confidence has fled, and government has diverted development resources to emergency response, impoverishing and destabilising the state.

The 2017 Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law, while representing important policy intent, has achieved limited success due to inadequate implementation, lack of cross-border coordination, and insufficient resource allocation, reflecting broader governance and institutional-capacity limitations that constrain policy effectiveness more generally. Addressing Benue State's insecurity and recovering from its devastation requires comprehensive, multi-sectoral, evidence-based intervention: security measures that enhance state presence and deter criminal activity while respecting human rights; conflict-resolution mechanisms that rebuild relationships between farmers and herders; resource-management policy that establishes equitable land-use frameworks; humanitarian assistance that protects and supports displaced populations while facilitating return and recovery; agricultural rehabilitation that restores productive capacity; and rebuilt education and healthcare systems alongside genuine economic recovery.

Critically, addressing insecurity requires engaging its structural drivers, including climate-change adaptation, poverty reduction, employment creation, governance strengthening and institutional development. The proliferation of banditry reflects not merely criminal inclination but the existence of desperate populations lacking livelihood alternatives, combined with weak state presence and inadequate law enforcement; addressing it thus requires both immediate security response and longer-term development and governance intervention addressing the conditions that allow banditry to flourish. The humanitarian crisis in Benue State demands urgent federal intervention and resource allocation, since the state's own resources, already severely constrained by economic disruption and revenue loss, are insufficient on their own. The recommendations presented in this study provide a framework for the comprehensive intervention that the people of Benue State, who deserve peace, security and the opportunity to rebuild their lives and livelihoods, urgently require.

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This Publication is sponsored by Tetfund through the Institutional Based Research fund of the Rev. Fr. Moses Orshio Adasu University, Makurdi.